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He Denies Fugitive Is 'Under Cuban House Arrest

Castro Accuses U.S. of Hounding Vesco

By WILLIAM R. LONG, Times Staff Writer

HAVANA—A farious Communist defending a fugitive capitalist? It might seem odd, but there was President Fidel Castro telling a press conference Sunday that fugitive financier Robert Vesco is being persecuted by the United States "as if he were a beast."

Castro's remarks about Vesco shed little light on the shadowy life and times of the former mutual fund operator, who is charged with swindling investors out of hundreds of millions of dollars. But the Cuban leader did acknowledge that Vesco probably has been living in Cuba. He also denied recent reports that Vesco was under house arrest.

The U.S. Department of Justice said Friday that Vesco was under arrest in his Havana home, confirming a television report by NBC News.

The Cuban leader was asked to comment on the Justice Department statement during a press conference Castro held to talk about last week's meeting here on Latin America's foreign debt. Without naming NBC, Castro accused the television network's

news team of collaborating with the CIA and with violating Cuban laws in preparing its report.

Vesco has been a fugitive since the early 1970s, when the Securities and Exchange Commission alleged in a civil complaint that he stole \$392 million from mutual fund investors. He has reportedly lived in Cuba since 1982.

'Had Nowhere to Go'

Last February, Castro said that he did not know whether Vesco was in Cuba, adding, "but he may be, or he may pass through here sometime." In Sunday's press conference, he went further.

"The first time he came here, he didn't have anywhere to go, because he was being persecuted like a beast," Castro said. "He came here to ask for medical care, and it was then that he was authorized to receive this medical assistance. And if he wants to live, let him live here.

"If he wants medical services, we will give him the medical services. We don't care about what he did in the United States. We're not interested in the money that he has,

whether it was \$100 or \$500 billion—we don't care."

Castro said Friday's television report on Vesco was aimed at diverting attention from the Havana foreign debt conference. He said the TV crew hid among bushes near a home where Vesco is said to live.

"It is probable that he is living there; I don't know," Castro said. "I don't know him; I don't know where the person lives.

'How Did They Know That?'

"Now then, how did they know that? It was undoubtedly because of the intelligence reports, the agents of the Central Intelligence Agency."

Castro continued:

"Now they have come up with a trap, an intelligence operation together with the CIA. They violated Cuban laws to take some photographs in front of the house of this man."

"Is it fair to harass a human being like that? And they boast so much about human rights. They're harassing a man throughout the world as if he were a beast."